

2004

# Hitting the Maternal Wall-Before They Reach a "Glass Ceiling" in Their Careers, Women Faculty May Hit a "Maternal Wall"

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## Recommended Citation

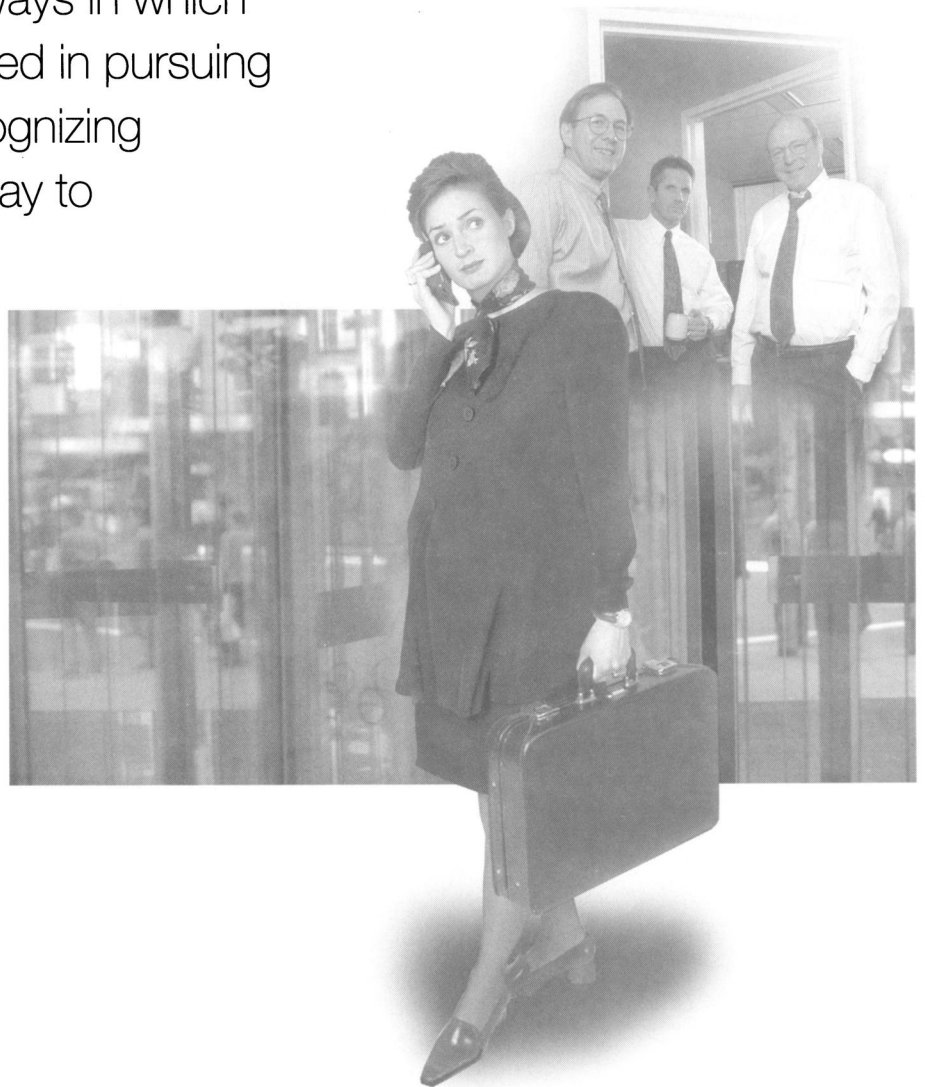
Joan C. Williams, *Hitting the Maternal Wall-Before They Reach a "Glass Ceiling" in Their Careers, Women Faculty May Hit a "Maternal Wall"*, 90 *Academe Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 16 (2004).

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# Hitting the Maternal Wall

There are many subtle ways in which women are disadvantaged in pursuing academic careers. Recognizing stereotypes is the first way to eliminate them.



BY JOAN C. WILLIAMS



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Women's lack of progress in academe is well documented: in its 1999–2000 report, the AAUP's Committee on the Economic Status of the Profession found "striking evidence of a distorted gender distribution by rank." Women are more likely than men to end up in low-paid, non-tenure-track positions that are often a dead end. Women who do manage to secure tenure-track jobs are less likely than men to be at four-year colleges; those at four-year institutions are less likely to be at highly ranked research universities. Why?

Part of the problem is gender bias, of two different types. The more familiar is the "glass ceiling" that prevents successful women from reaching the summit of their professions. But what exactly is the glass ceiling? Usually, it is defined demographically by documenting the dearth of women at the top. But why is there a dearth of women, when most academics—men as well as women—see themselves as committed to gender equality? Little information exists to help academic administrators who are determined to give women a fair shake.

In addition, many women never get near the glass ceiling because of the "maternal wall," a type of gender bias I described in a 2004 article in *Employee Rights and Employment Policy Law Review*. Like the glass ceiling, the maternal wall is documented demographically by showing the dearth of mothers in desirable faculty jobs. Women who have children soon after receiving their PhDs are much less likely to achieve tenure than men who have children at the same point in their careers. About 45 percent of tenured women are childless, according to University of California, Berkeley, dean Mary Ann Mason, whose article with UC Berkeley researcher Marc Goulden appears elsewhere in this issue. The high percentage of women without children may well be linked to "bias avoidance": the attempt to avoid the maternal wall by deferring or avoiding having children, as documented in economist Robert Drago's important work.

Again, demographic documentation of the maternal wall gives well-meaning administrators little guidance on how it arises. Depressing demography does not give much guidance on how to avoid more depressing demography in the future. This article does. It describes, in lay terms, the patterns of stereotyping and gender bias that create the glass ceiling and the maternal wall. Drawing on a review of over one hundred studies, it presents the latest findings of empirical social psychology in readily usable form.

## Stereotyping

The "commonsense" view of stereotyping is of an employer who misuses demography by assuming, for example, that because mothers as a group cut back their hours after they have kids, a particular woman will do so. Economists call this thinking "statistical discrimination"; social psychologists call it "descriptive stereotyping." When an employer disadvantages women by assuming they will conform to a stereotype, "cognitive bias" is often involved. The term refers to the

insight that much bias—based on gender, race, and other social categories—stems from the ways in which stereotypes shape perception, memory, and inferences.

Another kind of stereotyping, described by business school professor Diana Burgess and social psychologist Eugene Borgida, is "prescriptive stereotyping." Such stereotyping doesn't just assume stereotypical behavior; it tries to require it. In one case, *Bailey v. Scott-Gallagher, Inc.*, an employer fired an employee who sought to return from maternity leave on the grounds that mothers should stay at home until their children are grown.

Stereotypes often produce relatively small differences, but they add up over time. According to social psychologist Virginia Valian, "Success is largely the accumulation of advantage, exploiting small gains to get bigger ones." One experiment by Valian set up a model that built in a tiny bias in favor of promoting men; after a while, 65 percent of top-level employees were male. Conversely, the "accumulation of disadvantage" for women creates very real job detriments.

## The Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling is composed of two different patterns. One makes it harder for women to be perceived as competent. Women's successful performance tends to be more closely scrutinized, and assessed by stricter standards than men's. Men also have to give more convincing demonstrations of incompetence to be judged incompetent overall, according to social psychologist Martha Foschi. (Unless otherwise noted, all scholars cited hereafter are social psychologists.)

Women's struggle to establish competence is exacerbated both by the exercise of discretion and in the way that supposedly objective rules are applied. Studies by Marilyn Brewer have shown that when applying objective rules, men tend to create exceptions for men or to give them "the benefit of the doubt," a pattern called "leniency bias." To quote Brewer, "Coldly objective judgment seems to be reserved for members of out groups." For example, a search committee may require "all candidates" to have their dissertations completed, only to waive this requirement for a young man who comes with the "right recommendations" and "shows great promise." Indeed, social psychologists have documented that men tend to be judged on whether they show promise, whereas women in similar circumstances are often judged strictly on what they have actually accomplished.

Kay Deaux and Kim Emswiller have also shown that people tend to attribute their own behavior, or that of their in group, to stable causes, while they attribute the behavior of out groups to situational causes: he's brilliant, but she just got lucky. This tendency is called "attribution bias."

In addition, facts that fit a given stereotype are more accurately recalled than facts that do not, a pattern called "recall bias." Members of an in group are more likely to recall undesirable behavior committed by members of an out group than by in-group members. As a result, women professionals may have to try harder than men to be perceived as competent because their mistakes are remembered long after men's are forgotten.

## Effects of the Competency Struggle

The struggle to be perceived as competent affects women in multiple ways. First, Marilyn Brewer has documented that, as members of the out group, women tend to receive fewer rewards than men.

Second, a study by Janice Yoder shows that in workplaces with few women, those present—often called “tokens”—tend to receive polarized evaluations: either very good or very bad. Madeline Heilman, Richard Martell, and Michael Simon note that while a few “superstar” women may be perceived as highly competent, most women tend to receive sharply lower evaluations than similarly situated men. This pattern is particularly relevant to student teaching evaluations, according to a study by law professor Christine Haight Farley; it also is relevant to evaluations by faculty colleagues and outside reviewers.

Third, token women often experience what social psychologists such as Monica Biernat call the “solo” effect, causing them to feel isolated and unhappy. Of course, social isolation can easily give rise to poor peer evaluations because a colleague is “out of the loop.”

Fourth, according to studies by Kay Deaux, Thomas Eckes, Peter Glick, Susan Fiske, and Shelley Taylor, in environments in which women experience bias, particularly those

and approval.” In academic institutions, unease with an assertive woman may be expressed as criticism of a female colleague’s “lack of collegiality”—a formulation that may indicate a real problem, but also may signal simply that the gendered expectations of male colleagues were not met.

Gendered norms of self-promotion exacerbate the glass-ceiling catch-22. Because of the highly specialized nature of academic fields, a chief way for existing or potential colleagues to find out about a candidate’s accomplishments is for the candidate to tell them. Yet Alice Eagly and Steven Karau document that in some environments, men and women receive different responses to self-promotion. Men are admired for “knowing their own worth,” whereas women who behave similarly tend to be seen as arrogant.

In this and other contexts, women are penalized for behaving in the assertive manner associated with masculinity. The glass-ceiling catch-22 arises because women may also be penalized for behaving in too feminine a manner. An example is *Weinstock v. Columbia University* in which the plaintiff was faulted for being “nice” and “nurturing.” As the dissent explained, “[b]y describing her as ‘nice’ and referring to her nurturing manner, [colleagues] were not extolling her positive qualities—rather, they were using these qualities to highlight what they perceived to be her intellectual weakness.”

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in which they are outnumbered, women sometimes can succeed only by stepping into stereotypical roles reassuring to men. An example would be a department in which women can succeed only by playing roles that are supportive and nonthreatening to men: Taylor and others document the mother, who soothes and nurtures those around her; the princess, who allies with a powerful man (sometimes against more assertive women); and Ms. Efficiency, who endears herself by doing nonacademic work (giving faculty teas, for example) that similarly situated men are not asked to do. In general, these supportive roles are not ones that reinforce the perception of women as competent or (in the accepted academic parlance) “brilliant.”

### Catch-22: Competence Penalty

High-powered women often find themselves in a catch-22. On the one hand, they may find themselves struggling to be perceived as competent. On the other hand, they may well find themselves penalized for being too competent, according to work by Madeline Heilman and others. She has found that although assertiveness in men will often be seen as evidence of brilliance or originality, similar behavior in women may be viewed as distasteful. Such reactions matter because, to quote Heilman, “advancement in organizations depends not only on competence assessments but also on social acceptance

Another horn of the dilemma is that when a woman plays the warm and nurturing role, she may find herself doing a disproportionate amount of student advising, only to have her colleagues attribute that workload to her “maternal instinct” rather than to public spiritedness. If a woman is seen as merely expressing her “taste” for mothering, the department may not see her involvement with students for what it is: a disproportionate load of professional service.

Because competition is so intense for academic jobs, the glass-ceiling catch-22 can hit academic women hard. If they act brilliant, they may fail to meet the unarticulated expectation that women will be sociable and reassuring. Yet if they act too feminine, they may be deemed nice—but not brilliant.

### The Maternal Wall

Far fewer studies have explored the patterns of bias and stereotyping that affect mothers as opposed to women in general. Yet a growing literature documents that mothers encounter specific forms of bias that differ from glass-ceiling bias. Maternal-wall bias in academe typically is triggered when a woman gets pregnant or seeks a maternity leave. At each point, maternity may trigger negative competence assumptions and a distinctive maternal-wall catch-22.

The negative competence assumptions prompted by pregnancy are documented in a study by Jane Halpert, Midge

Wilson, and Julia Hickman, which found that performance reviews of female managers “plummeted” after pregnancy, partly because pregnancy activates the stereotype of women as irrational and overly emotional.

Problems surrounding maternity leave are particularly difficult in academe, because another member of a woman’s department typically must cover her courses during such leave. In addition, maternal-wall bias may arise if a woman challenges her institution’s parental or maternity leave policies: a 2003 study by economist Saranna Thornton found that over a third of the eighty-one institutions of higher education whose policies she reviewed had policies in violation of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act.

Mothers may also face negative competence assumptions when they return from maternity leave. Research by Susan Fiske, Peter Glick, and Thomas Eckes documents that although “businesswomen” are rated as similar in competence to “businessmen,” “housewives” tend to be seen as having extremely low competence, alongside (to use the researcher’s words) the “elderly,” “blind,” “retarded,” and “disabled.” A follow-up study by Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll found that working mothers are seen as more akin to housewives than to businesswomen.

Academic mothers also often report a particular form of attribution bias: colleagues who before they had children used to assume that the women were writing or at a conference when they were not in the office may well assume after they return from maternity leave that they are taking care of kids—even if they are at the library working on a book.

Pregnant women and mothers who go out of their way to be perceived as competent may encounter negative reactions to their assertiveness. Colleagues may sanction mothers who behave in traditionally masculine ways because of an unspoken expectation that mothers will be nonthreatening and “nice.” A study by Sara Corse found that some people like “pregnant women better when they behave passively than when they behave assertively and evaluate them more favorably when they occupy a stereotypically feminine rather than masculine work role.” Some co-workers also expect pregnant women to conform rigorously to the mandates of traditional femininity—to be, in Corse’s words, “nonauthoritarian, easy to negotiate with, gentle, and neither intimidating nor aggressive, and nice.” Of course, no one was ever

hired on the tenure track or promoted to full professor for being “nice.”

A woman who does not fulfill the feminized template of motherhood may be seen as “difficult” or “uncollegial.” Stereotypes about motherhood set up this dynamic. Work by Claire Etaugh and Gina Gilomen has shown that employed mothers are perceived as less family oriented, more selfish, and less sensitive to the needs of others than unemployed mothers. One can imagine an assertive woman who faced glass-ceiling problems in the past, perhaps because she resisted an overload of student advising, confirmed as selfish and insensitive to the needs of others once she becomes a (working) mother.

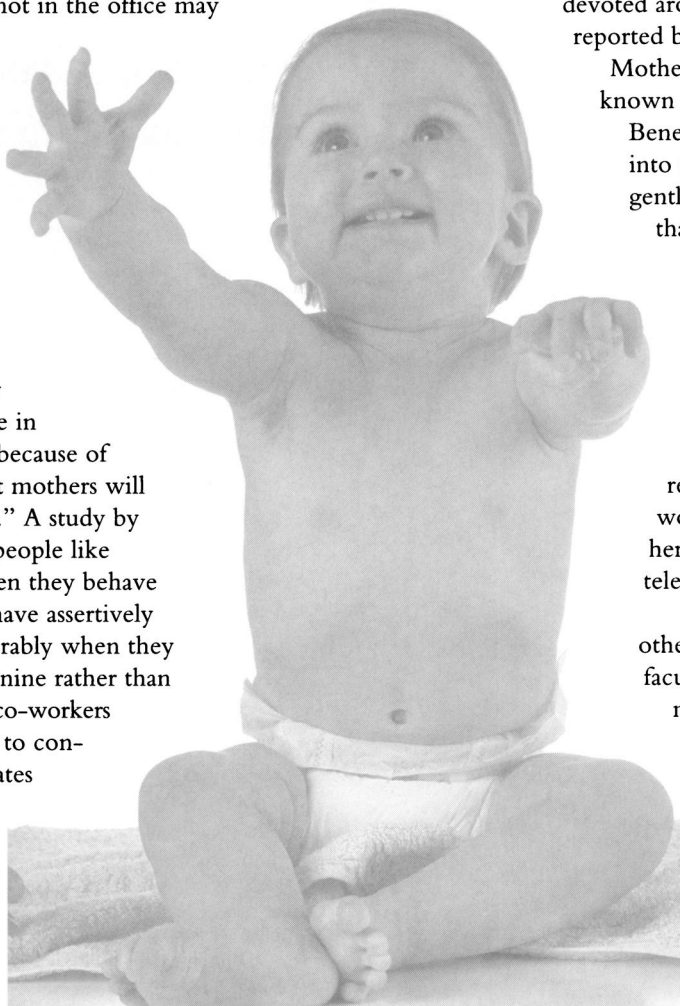
A related phenomenon, studied by Madeline Heilman, is the widespread sense that certain (typically dead-end) jobs are suitable for mothers, whereas certain (typically high-powered) jobs aren’t. In one tenure-denial lawsuit involving a reported tentative settlement of \$495,000, the provost at the University of Oregon allegedly told another professor that the mother’s decision to “stop the clock” was a “red flag”; the department chair also wrote in a memo that she “knew as a mother of two infants, she had responsibilities that were incompatible with those of a full-time academician.” This case aptly captures the bind for academic mothers caught between two greedy ideals: the ideal academic working close to sixty hours a week (as documented by Mary

Ann Mason and others), and the ideal mother devoted around the clock to her children (as reported by Monica Biernat).

Mothers may also experience a pattern known as benevolent stereotyping.

Benevolent stereotyping polices women into traditionalist roles in a “kinder and gentler” way, as when colleagues assume that a mother does not want to travel to conferences, does not want important committee assignments, or does not need summer research money because of her child care responsibilities. It is one thing for an employer to be sensitive to a woman’s new responsibilities and quite another for a woman to feel that she must live up to her colleagues’ expectation that she play television mom June Cleaver.

What is a well-meaning chair or other administrator to do? Simply ask faculty about their needs and avoid making assumptions. Some mothers will have husbands at home full time and will want to work all hours. Others will be primary caregivers with husbands who travel and will want more restricted schedules. By forcing couples into stereotypical gender roles, colleagues not only rely on traditional stereotypes;



they also help create them. This role is not suitable for an employer, and it does not take much imagination to envision situations in which legal liability might result.

### Fights Among Women

The maternal wall affects nonmothers as well as mothers. As Madeline Heilman has noted, it affects nonmothers to the extent that employers presume that all women, some day, will become mothers. For example, in *Barbano v. Madison County*, an employer asked women applicants questions about their family lives he did not ask men. The questions were relevant, he said, “because he did not want to hire a woman who would get pregnant and quit.”

Despite the fact that the maternal wall disserves all women, it commonly triggers fights, pitting nonmothers against mothers. This conflict, of course, decreases women’s ability to join together to counter gender bias at work. Extensive anecdotal reports, documented by author Elinor Burkett, suggest that this division often makes women their own worst enemies when women without children lead the charge against mothers. These “gender wars” may well be particularly acute in the academy because of the high numbers of women who are either painfully childless or ardently childfree.

with her own children, who fails to hire or promote another mother based on her belief that moms should work, at most, part time when kids are young. The crucial point is that all women—nonmothers as well as mothers—are disadvantaged by a workplace that enshrines an ideal worker who starts working in early adulthood and continues full time (and overtime) for forty years straight.

### The Paternal Wall

The maternal wall affects fathers as well as mothers. In fact, it can affect any adult who engages in the kinds of family caregiving traditionally allocated to mothers. Unfortunately, few studies analyze the employment barriers faced by fathers who seek an active role in family care. More research is urgently needed.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that academic fathers may face a threshold effect. Because men are presumed competent simply because they are men, fathers who take off for the occasional doctor’s appointment or child’s soccer game may actually benefit at work: they may be judged to be both warm and competent. Yet if a man goes beyond the occasional school play and asks for a full parental leave, he may find his future dimmed. In one department, young men confided to a mentor outside the department that they were

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Childless women are understandably pained when they are asked to countenance a shift in workplace norms that would make it easier for women to have children. For those who feel they sacrificed having a baby themselves through what author Sylvia Hewlett called “creeping nonchoice,” this wistfulness can easily turn to anger if they are asked, for example, to take over for a colleague out on parental leave.

Childless women often are joined by the child *free*, whose motivations differ. These women never wanted children; instead, they aspire to a full adult life without kids. They may feel that policies that help mothers reinforce the perception that all women are mothers, which in turn feeds the perception that women without children are unnatural.

The important message is that the maternal wall often manifests itself as a fight among women. That does not mean that it is not gender discrimination: social psychologist Jonah Goldberg has shown empirically that women as well as men hold gender stereotypes. In the recent landmark maternal-wall case of *Back v. Hastings on Hudson* (described in the Legal Watch column in this issue), the defendants were women who engaged in descriptive stereotyping, refusing to grant tenure to a school psychologist based on the assumption that she would slack off after tenure because she had “little ones at home.” Women also engage in prescriptive stereotyping: imagine an older woman who stayed home

afraid to ask whether they were eligible to take parental leave. They felt that even if they did not ultimately take the leave, their careers would be permanently damaged.

In addition, because of the widespread sense that “masculinity [is tied] to the size of a paycheck,” to quote author Robert Gould, a father who takes time off or goes part time may face the sense that he is less of a man. Finally, and most painfully, anthropologist Nicholas Townsend has suggested that a father whose status as an ideal worker is threatened may be seen not only as a less manly man but also as a less effective provider—and consequently as a flawed father.

A dramatic example of prescriptive stereotyping of fathers is *Knussman v. Maryland*, in which a Maryland state trooper was told that he could not take parental leave after the birth of his child “unless [his] wife [was] in a coma or dead.” When fathers are precluded from taking time off, they are forced into traditional breadwinner roles, and women are policed into caregiver roles.

In conclusion, despite its high aspirations and ivory towers, academe is just another workplace. As such, it is not immune from gender stereotyping and cognitive bias. To combat the negative effects of stereotyping and create more equitable institutions, academic administrators need to reexamine hiring and promotion decisions for the tell-tale signs of workplace discrimination exposed by the studies discussed in this article. 